Vanishing Culture: Preserving the Library System

by Brewster Kahle

I would never have thought I would see the day that the library system itself is under attack.

At home I had a couple of shelves of treasured kids' books while my parents had walls coated with books. The books and periodicals of my writer and publisher grandfather were on a special bookshelf in the room next to the kitchen—maybe not consulted often, but proudly protected and displayed. But the delight of first going to the White Plains Public Library is indelibly imprinted in my mind—the bookshelves seemed to go on forever. There was book after book after *Alice in Wonderland* in the card catalog, books about mathematical recreations I could not imagine finding anywhere else, and record albums I could borrow. And I still remember the librarian saying, "You can read any of these books you want, and if we don't have the one you want, we can get it for you [through the magic of interlibrary loan]." And this was all for free, which was the only thing that worked for a child. And available to everyone who could get their bones through that door of that magic place.

As a child, I did not know how special libraries were—I thought it was just how society worked—I thought there always were and always would be public libraries. I did not realize how fragile this system was until I became a digital librarian in order to make this promise come true for the next generation, a generation of digital learners. I did not think that in my lifetime this offer, this seeming human right, would be threatened by the people that made the fantasy-land of the White Plains Public Library possible: the corporate publishers.

Based on a simple but catastrophic business decision, the big publishers are making it impossible for libraries to do their core functions of preservation and enduring access in the digital era. Netflix, for instance, recently changed its terms of service to explicitly prohibit archiving, therefore allowing them to remove or change any movie for all subscribers at once.[1] The decision of the big publishers that is so threatening to the mission of libraries is to stop selling their products. Their books, music, and videos—as the world moves digital—are only available for temporary access by library patrons from databases the publishers control.

At the dawn of the Internet age, we dreamed of a different future, a future where authors got paid for their work, where writings would find their natural audience, where small publishers would flourish supporting a wider range of authors, where new publications and services would democratize production and access to information. The Internet could have been used to create

[1] Netflix. 2025. *Terms & Conditions*. https://www.netflix.shop/pages/terms-conditions "You agree not to archive, download (other than through caching necessary for personal use, to complete a product purchase or submit a customer service request), reproduce, distribute, modify, display, perform, publish, license, create derivative works from, offer for sale, or use content and information contained on or obtained from or through the Shop without express written permission from Netflix and its licensors."

this future, and many of us have worked hard to make it come true, but the lack of antitrust enforcement led to rapid consolidation of publishers, Internet technologies allowed successful online publishers to become dominant worldwide, and an advertising model that made for very few commercial winners. This toxic brew of the collapse of independent publishers and limited commercial platform controlling distribution has made the decentralized Internet seem like a lost opportunity.

Libraries in the United States are under attack through book bannings,[2] defundings,[3] increasing criminalization of librarianship,[4] licensing restrictions,[5] governors vetoing protection for libraries,[6] and a judiciary that is steadily siding with publishers.[7] This is a long way from a century ago when the United States led in libraries with the Carnegie libraries—supported by legislatures and judiciary—helping create an educated citizenry ready to enter the world stage.

But there is hope for libraries and a public seeking alternatives to the flood of disinformation and promoted materials coming from online and offline information producers. Libraries are still funded and staffed with smart, caring professionals. Readers are becoming more media-aware and discerning. Best of all, people are still free to create and publish quality works with the remaining distribution and compensation structures. It is still possible to have a game with many winners, but maybe this window is closing.

To preserve the library system's ability to help create an informed citizenry, we need libraries to buy, preserve, and offer free public access to the broad public. Our libraries have traditionally supported local authors and local publishers, and preserved a broad range of text, audio, and moving image materials. Libraries, when not stopped, have moved with the times, through microfilm and CD-ROMs, and now to the Internet in order to provide preservation and access. Our collective budgets in the United States support over 5% of all trade publishing revenues[8]—enough to cause a leveraged buyout firm, KKR, to find buying major publisher

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[2] American Library Association. 2025. *Book Ban Data*. https://www.ala.org/bbooks/book-ban-data

[3] Vilcarino, Jennifer. 2025. "Trump Admin. Cuts Library Funding. What It Means for Students." *Education Week*, March 19, 2025. https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/trump-admin-cuts-library-funding-what-it-means-for-students/2025/03

[4] Jensen, Kelly. 2025. "Librarian Criminalization Bills Are Growing, But They're Not New: Book Censorship News, March 14, 2025." *Book Riot*, March 14, 2025. https://bookriot.com/librarian-criminalization-bills-are-growing/. https://bookriot.com/librarian-criminalization-bills-are-growing/

[5] Kingson, Jennifer A. 2024. "Inside Libraries' Battle for Better E-Book Access." *Axios*, May 6, 2024. https://www.axios.com/2024/05/06/library-librarians-e-books-license-policies

[6] American Libraries. 2021. "N.Y. Gov. Hochul Vetoes Library Ebook Bill." American Libraries Magazine, December 29, 2021. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/latest-links/n-y-gov-hochul-vetoes-library-ebook-bill/

[7] Albanese, Andrew. 2022. "In Final Order, Court Declares Maryland's Library E-book Law Unconstitutional." *Publishers Weekly*, June 14, 2022. https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/89598-in-final-order-court-declares-maryland-s-library-e-book-law-unconstitutional.html

[8] Coates, Tim. 2023. "Should Public Libraries Double Down on Print Book Collections?" *Publishers Weekly*, March 10, 2023. https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/91693-should-public-libraries-double-down-on-print-book-collections.html

Simon and Schuster a good investment.[9] Our libraries are a captive market for a shrinking number of academic and trade publishers.

The best case is that large publishers see the value in selling their digital products through multiple marketplaces, including to libraries. The next best is that independent publishers sell to libraries, and libraries eagerly buy, preserve, and lend from their owned collections. Authors, musicians, filmmakers and creators of all kinds could choose publishers and websites that sell to libraries.[10]

Our evolving digital age can be our next Carnegie moment or it can be a Library of Alexandria moment. It is up to us.

About the author
Brewster Kahle is the digital librarian and founder of the Internet Archive.

This essay is part of the Internet Archive's Vanishing Culture series, highlighting the power and importance of preservation in our digital age.

[9] KKR. 2023. "KKR to Acquire Simon & Schuster from Paramount Global for $1.62 Billion." *KKR Media*, August 7, 2023. https://media.kkr.com/news-details?news_id=82241299-bf00-4648-a41d-5cb409d4e83d
[10] Bustillos, Maria. 2021. "Sell This Book!" The Nation, August 3, 2021. https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/libraries-digital-publishing-ebooks/